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A FORGOTTEN HIT: *THE NONJUROR*

BY DUDLEY MILES

Two hundred years ago or, to be exact, in the year 1717, there appeared in London's only daily the following notice: "Never Acted before. By His Majesty's Company of Comedians. At the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane, this present Friday, being the 6th of December, will be presented a new Comedy, call'd, The Nonjuror." Thus was announced the most extraordinary success of its decade. For fourteen days without fail it was presented without variation, the sixth day only being announced as "For the Benefit of the Author." That run brought the season up to the Saturday before Christmas, "Being the last Time of Acting till the Holidays." For the fifteenth day, Thursday, December 26, when the theatre was reopened, it was promised that the reigning sensation should be given "with the Dramatick Entertainment of Dancing, call'd, Mars and Venus. To begin exactly at Six a-Clock." The next day the play was repeated, but Saturday saw *Mithridates, King of Pontus* given, and Monday *Love Makes a Man*. On Wednesday, the first day of 1718, it was repeated with *Mars and Venus*.

After a lapse of two weeks it was played on Thursday, January 16, "At the Desire of several Persons of Quality . . . For the Benefit of the Author." The next day it was given "With the Prologue and Epilogue." Three weeks after, on Friday, February 7, it was repeated "At the Desire of Several Persons of Quality." Ten days later it was again found on the bill. On Monday, March 10, it was acted "At the particular Desire of several Persons of Quality" with a pantomime, *Orpheus and Euridice*. When it was played once more, on Wednesday, April 16, in response to a similar request, it was announced as "the last time of acting it this Season."

In the summer a company was organized under the direction of Mills which appeared on Tuesdays and Fridays from June 9 to August 22. On Monday, August 18, this group of players appeared "At Mr. Penkethman's new Theatre at Richmond," where "at the particular Request of several Persons of Quality" was presented *The Nonjuror* "With the Original Prologue and Epi-

logue." In the fall, on Saturday, October 18, it was acted for the twenty-fifth time within the year of its original production.¹

This surprising and long-continued popularity was matched by its printed form. On the tenth day of its performance, December 17, the following note appeared with the announcement: "In a very few Days will be publish'd, by Mr. Colle Cibber. The Non-juror. A Comedy. As it is acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane. Printed for Bernard Lintott between the Temple Gates. N. B. A small Number will be printed on Royal Paper, at Half a Crown each, stitch'd in Marble Paper and gilt Leaves. Those who will Subscribe for these, are desir'd to pay in their Money; and those who will take Numbers of the small Paper, shall have an Allowance."² The advertisement was repeated on December 19, but the book itself did not appear³ until January 2, 1718.⁴ But on the next day a second edition⁵ was demanded by the public, and on January 7 appeared a third. A fourth and a fifth were issued during the year, besides one for T. Johnson.⁶ In 1719 it

¹These dates show that Genest's figure of twenty-three performances is an error, and that Cibber's boast [*Apology*, II, p. 186 (1889)] that "it was acted eighteen Days running" should be reduced to sixteen.

²*The Daily Courant*, Tuesday, December 17.

³*The / Non-Juror. / A / Comedy. / As it is Acted at the/Theatre-Royal,/ By /His Majesty's Servants. /Written by Mr. Cibber. / —Pulchra Laverna / Da mihi fallere; da Justum, Sanctumq; videri,/Noctem Peccatis, & Fraudibus objice Nubem./Hor./London: /Printed for B. Lintot, at the Cross-Keys in /Fleetstreet. MDCXVII. /*

⁴The reason for this delay was, as we shall see later, that Cibber had secured permission to dedicate the play to the King. He had formally presented it on January 1 and received for his pains two hundred pounds. The advertisement in *The Daily Courant* for Thursday, January 2, ran as follows: "This Day is Published, The Nonjuror. A Comedy. As it is Acted at the Theatre Royal in Drury lane. Written by Mr. Cibber. Dedicated to the King. N. B. A small Number are printed on Royal Paper, at Half a Crown each, stitch'd in Marble Paper and Gilt Leaves. Printed for Bernard Lintot between the Temple-Gates."

⁵It is uncertain how large these editions were. Usually a printing numbered five hundred copies. The second edition is identical with the first except for the addition on the title-page, below the motto, of "The Second Edition" in small caps. Although I have not made the minute collation necessary to establish the point, this identity appears to extend to succeeding editions through the fifth.

⁶*The Non-Juror. A Comedy.* Written by Mr. Cibber. London, Printed for T. J. & are sold by the Book-sellers of London and Westminster, M.DCC.XVIII.

was included in "The English Theatre for the Year 1718"⁷ and was very properly given the first place. It was of course included in the collected edition of Cibber's plays in 1721⁸ as well as in later editions.

A play with so tremendous a popularity could not escape notice in the newspapers. The Whig organ noted the next day after its *première*: "Last Night the Comedy call'd the Nonjuror, was Acted at his Majesty's Theatre in Dryry-Lane, which very naturally displaying the Villany of that most wicked and abominable Crew, it gave great Satisfaction to all the Spectators."⁹ The next Saturday's paper contained a more extended notice:

"Hearing such a general Applause of Mr. Cibber's new Play, called the NONJUROR, it incited some particular Persons, well affected to the present Government, to go and see the same, and found the Report come far short of its due Recommendation; for without taking notice of the Exactness of the Play in respect how nicely it comes up to the Truth of dramatic Writing, in keeping close to the Unity of Action, Time, and Place, it display'd not only the Beauties of Love and Gallantry, but truly Decipher'd the Deformity of the greatest Villany shrouded under Jacobitism and Popery. The Prologue spoken as excellently by Mr. Wilks, as the Epilogue was by Mrs. Oldfield, they said ended with these Words,

*And Fools that are well stockt with Ready-Rino
Must keep it for the Impostor at Urbino.*

The several Incidents were very surprising, which happen'd thro' the well-laid Plot, which represented the most stupid and unparallel'd Bogottry of an old rich Jacobite, the Part whereof was incomparably well perform'd by Mr. Ben Johnson, who was so much intoxicated with Passive-Obedience and NonResistance, that he could almost have out-Sworn a Knight of the Post that the Pretender was a lawful begotten Child. His Wife and Son and Daughter, were all Christians, for they were for the Church of England,

⁷ *The English Theatre For the Year 1718: Consisting of all the New Comedies Acted at Both Houses. By his Majesty's Servants.* Viz. I. The Non-juror. By Mr. Cibber. II. The Artful Wife. By Mr. Taverner. III. The Coquet. By Mr. Molloy. IV. Love in a Veil. By Mr. Savage. London: Printed for E. Curll at the Dial and Bible, and R. Francklin at the Sun, both against St. Dunstan's Church in Fleetstreet. MDCCXIX. Price Six Shillings.

⁸ *Plays* written by Mr. Cibber. In Two Volumes. London; Printed for Jacob Tonson, over against Catherine-Street, in the Strand; Bernard Lintot, at the Cross-Keys between Temple-Gates, Fleetstreet; William Mears, at the Lamb, without Temple-Bar; and William Chetwood, at Cato's-Head, Russel-street, Covent-Garden, M.DCC.XXI.

⁹ *Read's Weekly Journal*, December 7, 1717.

and truly loyal to King GEORGE, which made the Husband endeavour to Poyson his whole Family with the destructive Principles of Indefeasible, Hereditary Right; being seconded by a Nonjuring-Parson, who was a Romish Priest in Masquerade, and made it his Glory, that whilst he was inciting the Tory-Mob to keep up the Church of England, he and such like him were pulling it down as fast as they could."

The article then continues to quote the bill of charges against the villain and to give a synopsis of the whole play.¹⁰ On the same page it printed a satirical reference to the play expressive of Whig satisfaction:

"Last Week the Nonjurors hearing that the Theatre in Drury-Lane, was to be made a nonjuring Conventicle, the Jacobites and Tories flockt thither in Shoals; but when they found the Persons that were to officiate there were all of Revolution-Principles, the poor Scoundrels S—neakt away like so many D—ogs that had lost their Tails."¹¹

A week later it reported that "Last Thursday Night, [December 19] his Majesty was at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane, to see the Play of the Non-Juror."¹² Mist's anti-Hanoverian *Weekly Journal* for the same day, with characteristic carelessness, declared that "On Wednesday and Thursday Nights last the King was at the Playhouse to see the Play acted call'd the Nonjuror."¹³ Applebee's *Original Weekly Journal* noted on the same day that "Also on Thursday Night, the King Came to the Theatre in Drury Lane, and saw the Comedy call'd *The Nonjuror*." It preceded this statement by the report that

"There has been for thirteen Nights successively Acted at the Royal Theatre in Drury-Lane a Play call'd *The Nonjuror*, written by Mr. Cibber; much Ridiculing the Principles and Practices of those people: 'Tis said Mr. Cibber hath clear'd already by this Play near one thousand Pounds; besides a large Present from ———. Its Observable the Play House has not been so Crowded for many Years; as since the Performance of this Play."¹⁴

A week passed before Mist printed a letter dated on Christmas Day to this effect:

"I wonder you have not yet past Censure upon a new Comedy, called the Non-juror, wherein the Author ridicules the whole Sacred Order, and makes

¹⁰ Read's *Weekly Journal*, December 14, 1717.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Read's *Weekly Journal*, December 21, 1717.

¹³ *The Weekly Journal: or, Saturday's-Post*, December 21, 1717.

¹⁴ Applebee's *Original Weekly Journal*, December 21, 1717.

a very Jest of Conscience. Let any one who knows any thing of the Institution and Rules of the Drama, consider this Piece, and then say, whether the Author does not equally offend against Art and good Sense, Religion and good Manners. Such Authors are the Bane of all Society; they pervert the very end of Things, and turn that to Excrement which was design'd for Nourishment." ¹⁵

On the same day the pacific Applebee informed the public that "We hear that Mr. Cibber has obtained Permission to Dedicate his excellent Comedy of the *Nonjuror*, to the King, and will present it to His Majesty on the first of January next," ¹⁶ That explains, as was noted above, why the appearance of the first edition was deferred till January 2, and perhaps why the second edition was so soon ready.

The next Saturday Read printed in full "The Prologue, written by N. Rowe, Esq; to the incomparable Comedy, call'd, The *Nonjuror* and spoken by Mr. Wilks," as well as "The Epilogue spoken by Mrs. Oldfield." ¹⁷

Up to this moment Mist had found anything but satisfaction in the extraordinary success of the Whig comedy, but on the first of March he took great glee in printing a letter dated from Button's Coffee House February 20:

"Mr. Mist, I Can't help desiring you to inform the Publick of the strange Revolution of Fortune which the Author of a late Play, call'd the *N—j—r*, hath met with: This *would-be-Wit* (in spite of Nature) having more than once imposed upon the Town some good Plays for his own, has at last discovered his own Stupid Barrenness of Genius, by not making, but turning a Play to a Subject which ought rather to be pitied than ridicul'd; in which he has heap'd together more Malice, Nonsense, and Obscenity than ever was presented in one dramatick Performance before: And as to his Character of the Parson, there is not one Instance (among all those unhappy Gentlemen) to be found that can justify the least Part of his Representation. I will not speak of the want of Generosity to insult a fallen People, for the Wretch never could have one spark of Honor in him.

"But to my present Purpose: It is believed he got by the Profits of this doughty Performance about 1000 l. which I hear he has been decently stript of at the Groom-Porter's, and I am assured it is Truth: As also another piece of barbarous Extravagance; [to the effect that he stole eighty pounds from a benefit performance for his daughter]. Charles Johnson." ¹⁸

¹⁵ Mist's *Weekly Journal*: or, *Saturday's Post*, December 28, 1717.

¹⁶ Applebee's *Original Weekly Journal*, December 28, 1717.

¹⁷ Read's *Weekly Journal*, January 4, 1718.

¹⁸ Mist's *Weekly Journal*, March 1, 1718.

These repeated references to the play in the public prints are, I believe, a unique testimonial to its popularity. References to the current productions were in that day almost unknown. The dramatic critic and the press agent were undreamed of. To this play the references are numerous and lengthy. The play was, indeed, the event of its generation. Between *Cato*, produced April 14, 1713, and *The Provoked Husband*, first acted on January 10, 1728, public attention was never so centered on a theatrical production, and even in those cases there is no indication that discussion was stirred up to so notable an extent.

But *The Nonjuror* was not only successful in itself—it was the cause of success in other plays! A notable instance is *The Per-juror*, by Christopher Bullock.¹⁹ The farce may have been suggested by the successful run of Cibber's comedy. The character of the mercenary and lascivious Justice Bind-over might well have been suggested by Dr. Wolf, and one scene in which he is overheard talking with an actress bears an obvious resemblance to the second meeting of Dr. Wolf and Lady Woodville in the fifth act of *The Nonjuror*. First produced on December 12, it was repeated on December 18,²⁰ with *Mangora, King of the Timbusians, or The Faithful Couple*. It was repeated the next day with *The Woman's Riddle*, and on the twentieth with *The Anatomist, or the Sham Doctor*. On Saturday the twenty-eighth and Monday the thirtieth it was acted with *The Fair Quaker of Deal*, and on January 9 with *The Fair Example*. The directness with which it used the interest aroused by the more successful play is apparent from the following notice:

"The Informers being very busie last Southwark-Fair, in taking up the

¹⁹ *The Per-Juror. As it is Acted at the Theatre in Lincoln's-Inn-Fields.* London: Printed for William Mears at the Lamb, Jonas Brown at the Black Swan, and F. Clay at the Bible without Temple-Bar, MDCCXVII.

²⁰ The Fourth Day. By the Company of Comedians. At the Theatre in Little-Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, this present Wednesday, being the 18th of December, will be presented a new Tragedy, call'd Mangora, King of the Timbusians. With Music Vocal and Instrumental, Dances, and other Decorations proper to the same. To which (at the particular desire of several Persons of Quality) will be added the last new Farce call'd The Per-juror. N. B. And whereas there are a great many Scenes and Machines to be mov'd in this Play, which cannot be done if Persons should stand on the Stage, it is therefore hoped no Persons will take it ill that they must be denied coming behind the Scenes. (*The Daily Courant*, December 18, 1717.)

Actors of several Booths, not out of Conscience but Interest, their Villainy is very prettily expos'd by a Farce acted at the Playhouse in Lincoln's-Inn Fields, call'd the Per-juror, the Prologue whereof is as follows, and spoken by Mr. Spiller, who was one of them that was taken up.

Well, I'm glad that any thing will bring you,
 Tho' Faith we've nothing but a Name to win you.
 All you that come, expecting Party-Wit,
 As sure as you're alive now, you are all bit
 No doubt your Expectations all were big,
 That this Per-juror was a furious Whig,
 A Wolf disguis'd, some sham Religious Preacher,
 Yea-and-Nay Friend, or Anabaptist Teacher,
 No; Politicks we cautiously disclaim;
 Who'd with fresh Fuel feed a dying Flame?
 We scorn a Shelter from that stale Pretence,
 To screen with Party-Rage our Want of Sense."²¹

In a letter to *Mist* dated December 25, a writer, after denouncing *The Nonjuror*,²² adds:

"I cannot leave you without taking notice of another Play, lately acted at the New House, called the Perjuror, by way of Opposition to the Non-juror. That Author has very justly introduced an informing Constable, or Reformation Man, and has made a good Essay towards reforming even the Reformers themselves. That Abuses have been committed by those People is too notorious to need any single Proof or Instance. But to make a Farce of a Matter of Conscience, is what would not be tolerated in any other Christian Country in the World."²³

Applebee likewise added to his notice of *The Nonjuror*²⁴ this sentence:

"A Play call'd, the *Perjuror*, has also been Acted several times at the Theatre in Little Lincoln's-Inn-Fields; which 'tis said, is set up in Opposition to that of the *Nonjuror*; but has not met with nigh the Applause and Success as the Latter."²⁵

Indeed, the applause and success with which it did meet were evidently due to its rival and suggester.

Another farce that enjoyed popularity of another kind for the same reason was *The Juror*,²⁶ which was never acted. On the title

²¹ Read's *Weekly Journal*, December 21, 1717.

²² Cf. *ante*, p. 6.

²³ *Mist's Weekly Journal*, December 28, 1717.

²⁴ Cf. *ante*, p. 5.

²⁵ *The Original Weekly Journal*, December 21, 1717.

²⁶ *The Juror*. A Farce. By W. B. formerly of St. John's Colledge Camb.

page was printed the epilogue in order that, as with the modern magazine that flaunts its varicolored cover before the susceptible purchaser, every eye might be attracted by the reigning interest:

Here you may see what Hippocrites will do,
 What various Villanies such Men run through;
 What mighty Ills from Perjury proceed,
 What Orphans ruin'd, and what Nations bleed:
 What Treaties broke, what Monarchs been betray'd,
 How States-men rise, and Tradesmens Fortune made:
 Whate'er *Non-jurors* teach we sadly know,
 But 'tis the *Juror* strikes the deadliest Blow.

The use made of treason in unraveling the situation indicates that the play itself was suggested by Cibber's sensational production. At any rate, this borrowed popularity helped the piece to run through five editions, the third of which appeared on February 8, 1718, and was again advertised on April 26, shortly after a revival of *The Nonjuror*.

With the third play whose sales and production were due to the success of *The Nonjuror*, the case is reversed. Cibber was charged with having stolen his play from it, instead of its being inspired by his play. On December 27 appeared this advertisement: "This Day is Published, *Tartuffe*; or, *The French Puritan*. Written in French by Moliere, and render'd into English with Improvements by the late Mr. Medbourne; in which Play may be seen the Plot, Characters, Incidents, and most part of the Language of *The Nonjuror*. . . . R. Wellington at King George's-Head over against St. Clement's Church in the Strand."²⁷ This was repeated on the next day and on January 1 and 6 in 1718. The play had already seen two editions, the first shortly after its first production in 1670²⁸ and a second in 1707,²⁹ possibly on the occasion of a revival

London; Printed for John Norcock next the Devil Tavern within Temple-Bar. MDCCXVIII.

²⁷ *Daily Courant*, December 27, 1717.

²⁸ *Tartuffe: or the French Puritan. A Comedy, Lately Acted at the Theatre Royal. Written in French by Moliere and rendered into English with much Addition and Advantage*, By M. Medbourne, Servant to His Royal Highness. London: Printed by H. L. and R. B. for James Magnus at the Posthouse in Russel-street near the Piazza in Covent Garden, M.DC.LXX.

²⁹ *Tartuffe: or, the French Puritan. A Comedy, Acted at the Theatre Royal. Written in French by Moliere, and Render'd into English, with much Addition and Advantage*, by M. Medbourne, Servant to His Royal

of which there is now no record. The publisher of this second edition brought out the 1717 edition, of which I have been able to find no exemplar, but he had in the meantime moved from St. Paul's Churchyard to the Strand. After the repeated performance of Cibber's play the managers of Lincoln's Inn Fields at last made this announcement:

"Not Acted these Thirty Years. By the Company of Comedians. At the Theatre in Little-Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, To-morrow, being Friday, the 20th of June, will be reviv'd a Comedy call'd, *Tartuffe*; or *The Hypocrite*. Written originally in French by Moliere. The principal Parts to be perform'd by Mr. Ch. Bullock, Mr. Leigh, Mr. Spiller, Mr. Ogden, Mr. Smith, Mr. Diggs, Mrs. Spiller, Mrs. Finch, Mrs. Robinson, and Mrs. Elsam. With a New Prologue."³⁰

The piece was repeated the following Wednesday, June 25, and "At the Desire of several Persons of Quality" on Thursday, July 3. A year later, on Wednesday, June 24, 1719, it received what was in all probability its last representation.

But the newspapers and the repeated performances and the success of plays suggested by it were not the only evidence of the impression which *The Nonjuror* made on the public. Indeed, much more vehement witnesses are the numerous pamphlets occasioned by it. Apparently the earliest³¹ was written during the Christmas vacation, for the writer speaks of the King's having seen the play last Thursday, December 19, and of having seen it himself fourteen times. It was therefore written between December 11 and 26. It was so highly laudatory, expressing the wish that the comedy might become as common in every house as the book of common prayer, that Cibber's enemies accused him of writing it. It did not issue from the press until January 3.

On the following Monday, January 6, appeared a synopsis³²

Highness. London: Printed for Richard Wellington, Bookseller, at the Dolphin and Crowne in St. Paul's Church-yard. 1707.

³⁰ *Daily Courant*, June 19, 1718.

³¹ *Some Cursory Remarks On the Play call'd The Non-Juror. Written by Mr. Cibber. In a Letter to a Friend.* London, Printed for William Chetwood, at the Cato's Head in Russell-Court near the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane. 1718.

³² *The Comedy call'd the Non-Juror. Shewing The particular Scenes wherein that Hypocrite is concern'd. With Remarks, and a Key, Explaining The Characters of that Excellent Play.* London: Printed for J. L. and Sold by the Booksellers of London and Westminster. 1718.

containing most of the scenes in which Dr. Wolf takes part. But the chief interest of the pamphlet is in the annotations of the prologue and epilogue and a key to the characters, largely to those in the satirical list of expenses incurred by Dr. Wolf. The publication of such a key is in itself an evidence of the widespread discussion which the play had aroused and no doubt represented the decisions of the coffeehouse wits concerning the points in Cibber's satire.

Much more popular, however, was another brochure³³ issued the same day by John Durant Breval, which ran into a second edition on January 8, and later saw an expanded third edition. It was apparently suggested by that edition of Medbourne's *Tartuffe* which was advertised on December 27, the first good opening which Cibber's enemies had found. It is mainly taken up with a tracing of Cibber's indebtedness to Molière, the occasion for many depreciatory remarks on his plagiarism and his satire. But it contains at the end the "Compleat Key," which doubtless accounts for the continued sale of the production. The third edition, although the pamphlet had all along been called complete, took over from its companion of January 6, "The Comedy call'd the Nonjuror," four identifications from Dr. Wolf's list of expenses.

This first condemnation of Cibber, found in Gay's, really Breval's, pamphlet, was not nearly strong enough to please those of Jacobitish leaning. A man bold enough to sign himself "Nonjuror" hastily prepared a still more condemnatory attack.³⁴ It was advertised in *Mist's Weekly Journal* as to appear on January 7, but its actual appearance was on January 11. It was even more caustic than Gay in accusing Cibber of plagiarism, finding Molière innocent of indelicacy while Cibber was full of it, declaring *The Nonjuror* much less natural than *Tartuffe*, and concluding with an angry denial of all of Gay's identifications. In short, it was as

³³ *A Compleat Key to the Non-Juror. Explaining The Characters in that Play, with Observations thereon.* By Joseph Gay. London: Printed for E. Curll, at the Dial and Bible, over-against St. Dunstan's Church in Fleetstreet. 1718.

³⁴ *The Theatre-Royal Turn'd into a Mountebank's Stage. In Some Remarks upon Mr. Cibber's Quack-Dramatical Performance, called the Non-Juror.* By a Non-Juror. London: Printed for John Morphew, near Stationers Hall. 1718.

outspoken as was safe for a Jacobite to be in that day of Whig triumph.

Another clue ³⁵ to the play served a quite different purpose. It praised the play, to be sure, but it did so to make the satire in it apply to Bishop Hoadley, the arch-representative of the Whig views in religion. A more complete stealing of the enemy's thunder it would be difficult to conceive.

The last of the pamphlets ³⁶ occasioned by the play was directed against the prologue alone. In heroic couplets, and pretending great zeal throughout for King George, it yet abounds in abusive epithets and phrases for Rowe's attack on the Nonjurors in his prologue.

So far as I have investigated, no play of that age led to such vehement attack and defence as Cibber's *Nonjuror*. Certainly in the length of run, in the number of editions, in the amount of newspaper comment, in the plays that owed their success to it, and in the various pamphlets occasioned by it—in this combination of evidence *The Nonjuror* surpassed any other production in the dramatic history of its time, even the production of *Cato* in 1713 and of *The Provoked Husband* in 1728.

New York City.

³⁵ *A Clue To the Comedy of the Non-Juror. With Some Hints of Consequence Relating to that Play. In a Letter to N. Rowe, Esq; Poet Laureat to His Majesty.* London: Printed for E. Curll, in Fleet-street. 1718.

³⁶ *A Lash for the Laureat: or an Address by Way of Satyr; Most Humbly Inscrib'd to the Unparallel'd Mr. Rowe, On Occasion of the late Insolent Prologue to the Non-Juror.* London: Printed for J. Morphew near Stationers-Hall. MDCCXVIII.